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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: UNDP CANDIDATE CHUNG TO JEOLLA: WHERE'S THE LOVE?

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Jeolla region has historically supported liberal politics and progressive candidates. Overwhelming (over 90 percent) support in the Jeolla provinces helped Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun gain office in otherwise closely contested elections in 1997 and 2002, respectively. Despite United New Democratic Party (UNDP) candidate Chung Dong-young's Jeolla roots and liberal agenda, support even in his home region is tepid and lacks the energy of previous elections. Whether because of dissatisfaction with the outgoing Roh administration, indifference toward candidate Chung and/or common economic concerns with the rest of Korea, the 2007 presidential election may herald a gradual shift away from the strict regional-based voting that has traditionally characterized this extremely partisan area. Although Chung will likely carry the region handily, his conservative opponent Lee Myung-bak is expected to receive unprecedented voter support in Jeolla. END SUMMARY.

JEOLLA: DJ COUNTRY AND THE HEART OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

12. (C) November 14-15, poloff traveled to Mokpo and Gwangju in South Jeolla Province in the southwestern corner of the Korean peninsula. Known as the home of Korea's democracy movement, Jeolla has a distinctive regional identity characterized by a fiercely partisan and progressive brand of politics. Under the "T-K," or Taegu-Kyungsang administrations of former presidents Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, the Jeolla provinces suffered greatly from regional discrimination. Much needed economic investment, infrastructure improvement and industrial development were purposely diverted away from the Jeolla region during the T-K regimes, and Jeolla natives were generally excluded from top positions in government and private industry. During this time, Jeolla native Kim Dae-jung was a vocal political activist and repeatedly ran in presidential elections against the ruling junta, for which he was repeatedly persecuted, jailed and, on more than one occasion, sentenced to death. The 1980 Gwangju Massacre, where hundreds of civilians were killed by military forces, epitomized the Jeolla region's struggle with longstanding regional discrimination and Korea's autocratic regimes. However, the ascension of favorite son Kim Dae-jung to the presidency in 1998 brought investment and development to this relatively impoverished region and increased access for all Jeolla natives throughout the public and private sectors.

UNDP CANDIDATE: CHUNG DONG-WHO?

13. (C) A leading Mokpo UNDP official told poloff that support in the Jeolla region for the liberal candidates was "somewhat muted and indifferent" compared to previous elections. A group of leading political journalists in Gwangju echoed similar sentiments over lunch with poloff. One contact said that in the Jeolla provinces, UNDP candidate Chung Dong-young had less than 50 percent support in all polls, highly irregular for a region that routinely gives progressive candidates well over 90 percent of their votes in presidential elections. He also stated that it was equally unusual that conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak was polling at near 20 percent in Jeolla and that, according to area polls, about 30 percent of respondents were still undecided. To explain Chung's relatively low support and Lee's high approval ratings, the contact speculated that many Jeolla voters were disillusioned with Roh's handling of the economy, were hopeful that Lee Myung-bak's economic policies would "trickle down" and improve the Jeolla economy and had decided that, since Lee's victory was a foregone conclusion, it was not worth mobilizing support for Chung.

14. (C) When asked about the effect of regionalism on Jeolla voting patterns, the journalists agreed that regionalism was still important to the older generation (50s and over), but much less relevant to young people who grew up during the internet age. Common economic concerns, interest in educational reform and concern about future employment prospects, rather than ancient regional feuds, motivated the voting habits of young people in Jeolla. They also mentioned that any prospective merger among the progressive parties would have little to no effect on the liberal candidates' lackluster support in the area.

15. (C) Korea Society Opinion Institute Research and Analysis Chief Hahn Gwi-young told poloff on November 16 that Chung was desperately courting the votes of Jeolla natives who currently resided in Seoul, many of whom supported Lee Myung-bak. Hahn theorized that these Seoul-based Jeolla natives might be exerting a "reverse-regional influence" on their family and friends back home. She added that, during this election season, shared economic concerns were uniting the regional and factional interests throughout the country in an unprecedented way.

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

16. (C) Politicians, journalists, professors and even taxi drivers that poloff met and talked with in Jeolla concurred that the economy was the overriding issue for the election. The hot button topics of previous presidential elections including North Korea, U.S.-ROK relations and even educational reform were not setting the candidates apart because their policies were so similar. A Gwangju reporter explained that foreign affairs issues such as a North Korean peace regime or OPCON transfer were barely on the radar of most voters because the Roh administration had already set these events in motion; Roh's successor could do little but continue these policies. Lee Myung-bak's private sector experience and economic platform seemed to cut both ways among Jeolla voters. Some voters highlighted Lee's strong economic track record as a positive, while others felt uneasy about the GNP's support of the KORUS FTA. The editor of a leading Gwangju daily cautioned that the gap between rich and poor would increase under a GNP president. He predicted that Lee Myung-bak's desire to serve only the wealthy would alienate the common man, a concern that epitomized Jeolla's traditional populist ideology.

MOKPO GNP OFFICE: STILL SURVIVING

¶7. (C) On November 14, poloff attended a rally for Lee Myung-bak at the Mokpo Grand National Party (GNP) headquarters, located in a cramped space above a Ssangyong car dealership. A local GNP official said that supporting the GNP in Mokpo, the birthplace of Kim Dae-jung, was similar to "secretly operating in the Korean independence movement during the Japanese occupation." Another local official added that things had improved markedly during this current presidential campaign -- Mokpo citizens didn't throw rocks, bottles and other projectiles at GNP officials with the same fervor they once had.

¶8. (C) The chairman of the Mokpo GNP election committee and former National Assemblyman Chun Suk-hong gave the stump speech to 40-50 dedicated party members during the rally. Exhorting his comrades with great energy, Chairman Chun emphasized the superior qualifications and moral integrity of Lee Myung-bak. He criticized former GNP candidate and current third-party candidate Lee Hoi-chang for repudiating the primary process and reneging on his previous promise to retire from politics. Referring to the BBK/Kim Kyung-joon scandal, Chun defended the ethical record of Lee Myung-bak, and claimed Lee was a victim of financial fraud. He said that, given the scores of people who had been swindled by Kim Kyung-joon, something more concrete would have emerged by now if any of the rumors about Lee's alleged involvement were true. Chun also praised Lee's impressive economic record as CEO of Hyundai Construction and Seoul Mayor in an election characterized by the old 1992 Bush-Clinton campaign slogan, "It's the economy, stupid!"

¶9. (C) In a separate conversation, Mokpo GNP election committee vice chairman Kang Nam-gyu expected that economic conditions in the region under Lee Myung-bak would improve. He mentioned that many Jeolla residents had become disillusioned by the lack of infrastructure improvement under President Roh. Kang said that, for example, it took over three hours for the KTX express train to complete the trip from Seoul to Gwangju because an old, outdated rail system and antiquated railcars prevented the KTX from reaching top speeds. According to Kang, Lee Myung-bak has promised to upgrade the Seoul-Jeolla KTX line as one of his first initiatives. Kang said the Mokpo GNP was optimistic about Lee Myung-bak's chances, but more cautious than during the 2002 presidential election. In 2002, the campaign committee planned GNP candidate Lee Hoi-chang's victory party days in advance of the election, which he eventually lost. Moreover, the central GNP party headquarters in Seoul sent two representatives to each voting district in Korea the day before voting, which cost the GNP candidate over 600 votes in a closely contested election. Kang hoped that the GNP was not so overconfident this time around.

JEOLLA POLITICS: A "FAMILY BUSINESS"

¶10. (C) The Jeolla region and its people are commonly stereotyped as being involved in organized crime. A recent hit movie comically portrayed Mokpo as the center of the Korean mob. Mokpo native Kim Dae-jung's administration was hard hit by numerous scandals, culminating in the indictment of Kim's three sons on bribery charges. During a brief visit, poloff got a taste of this old school political culture that seems alive and well in Jeolla. A UNDP contact in Gwangju, who claimed to be in "private business," repeatedly made side phone calls to political operatives throughout the Jeolla countryside. In these private phone conversations, he mentioned that there was a random telephone poll being conducted the next day and to "pass the word" that respondents were to answer in a way favorable to the UNDP. In the middle of these calls, the contact paused to ask poloff whether he would "report on these conversations to Washington." After being assured that poloff would, in fact, report these conversations, the contact shrugged and resumed his political maneuvering. Many Koreans rely on one's family and social connections in business and politics, and nowhere

is this practice more pronounced than in Jeolla. Political experts note that it is still common to "buy" votes in the countryside with meals, gifts or money, although this practice has mostly disappeared in Seoul because Seoul voters are generally not swayed by such offerings.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) When asked about the upcoming presidential election, Jeolla natives repeatedly responded that the election was "no fun" or "not interesting." This disillusionment stems from a combination of apathy towards the available candidates and the perception that Lee Myung-bak has already won the election. Although the leading liberal candidate, presumably Chung Dong-young of the UNDP, will comfortably carry the Jeolla provinces once again, he will not receive the overwhelming (90 percent plus) support of previous elections. The 2007 presidential election may be the first where national concerns over the economy trump regional issues for Jeolla voters, and the liberal candidates' failure to mobilize their traditional voter base mirrors their inability to energize the wider Korean electorate.
STANTON